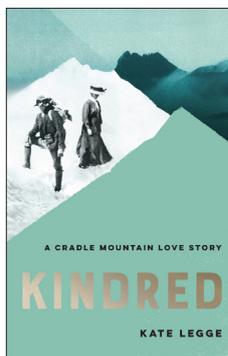


the heart of their appreciation of nature. Like other settler wilderness enthusiasts – John Muir especially – there was little room for an Indigenous history of scenic and scientific landscapes.

Finally, this book provides new contexts for recent controversies in the Tasmanian highlands. Far from the sparsely populated space that the Weindorfers encountered in 1909, Cradle Mountain is now the destination of some 280,000 tourists a year. It's an engine for the Tasmanian economy. As a journalist, Legge has recently investigated plans to develop an eco-tourist lodge within the Walls of Jerusalem National Park. *Kindred* explains how these still-contested sites were initially encountered, belatedly appreciated, and eventually held up as paradigms of settler environmental management.

Though the Weindorfers might have been horrified at the sight of so many tourists flowing off buses or by the notion of them dropping in on helicopters, they would probably also see a fulfilment of their original ambitions. The highlands are still a laboratory for science, but they are also a source of inspiration for tourists and other visitors. It is as if the evangelism of wilderness advocates still puts them in complicated positions. This contradiction hung over the Weindorfers at *Waldheim* and clearly haunts nature lovers still. ■



Jarrod Hore is a historian from Sydney. He teaches and researches at Macquarie University and specialises in environmental and settler colonial history. He is currently working on a book about settlers, nature, and wilderness thinking in late-nineteenth-century Australasia and California. ❖

Political poetics

Two new poetry collections

Jen Webb

BLAKWORK

by Alison Whittaker

Magabala Books, \$24.99 pb, 179 pp, 9781925360851

WALKING WITH CAMELS:

THE STORY OF BERTHA STREHLOW

by Leni Shilton

UWA Publishing, \$22.99 pb, 150 pp, 9781742589701

Alison Whittaker's debut collection, *Lemons in the Chicken Wire* (2015), introduced a genuinely new voice to Australian poetry: that of a Gomerioi woman, a Fulbright scholar, and a poet who can bend and blend forms with the best of them. Her second collection of poems, *Blakwork*, places her firmly in both the broad community of celebrated Australian poets and the celebrated Aboriginal writers in Magabala's lists.

Like *Lemons*, *Blakwork* is packed with wit, image, and sensibility; with views that surprise, excoriate, charm, and amuse, by turns. It revisits and reviews conventional Myths of Oz: the poem 'not one silent lamb', for example, shifts the story of a country that rides on the sheep's back to one of a country that is simply a 'grass-fed mine', carrying on its back the 'trespassing sheep'. (It also offers a phrase that is new to me, a brilliant and economical characterisation of white settlers/invasers, as 'them nullius men'.) Then there's that popular myth, the Picnic at Hanging Rock, retold in 'MANY GIRLS WHITE LINEN' (winner of the 2017 Judith Wright Poetry Prize), where Whittaker contrasts those fey, white/whiteclad schoolgirls with the 'blak girls' who in that same place 'hang / nails hang out picking / them hangnails'. And yet another: 'a love like Dorothea's', which reprises and revises Dorothea Mackellar's 'I love a sunburnt country'. Whittaker adopts fragments of Mackellar's often sentimental lexicon while observing – wryly, tragically – how that story of

Australia delimited the modes of love for country, excluding Aboriginal ways of inhabiting the land: 'I loved a sunburnt country, won't it / gingerly limp back? / I can't get past the concrete and my blak tongue's gone all slack'.

It's probably a miscategorisation to name this collection a book of poems. Individual pieces are image-oriented; 'scissors anchor pistol', for instance, is all emojis, while 'exhibit tab' is a heavily redacted collection of lines from the inquest into the death in custody of Ms Dhu. A number of poems are set landscape on the page ('cottonononon', for example), requiring the reader to swivel the book, and thus doubling as a metaphor for different ways of seeing. There's play with language, too: the making up of words, or clustering of letters in unpronounceable combinations in 'fieldwork', a sequence of letters that remind the ear of the word 'attack' – 'Gatcctccat attacaacggt atctccacct cag-gttga don't tctcaaca ggaaccattg cgcagat-gag actagtaggt mind' (et cetera) – are punctuated by recognisable words that together become a sentence beginning 'don't mind me I'm just here ...'. Other sections again are not poetry at all, but prose life writing. 'The abattoir', for example, is a sequence of short pieces about family, the business of meat, and the need to 'adapt, always mediators of the squeamish line between life and the lives we have to take to keep living'.

This is a political book, one that extends and enhances poetic diction in Australia, but it is never didactic. Full of image, pulsing rhythm, and (sometimes)

rhyme, it rollicks along, critiquing, teasing, reflecting, calling its readers in. It never takes its eye off the history of post-invasion Australia and what this means for Aboriginal people, of how law fails to function appropriately when its subject is black, and of the mismatch between white and Aboriginal ways of being and living in this country. Yet there is no sentimentality, no mere complaint: rather, it is a nuanced, critical, felt, and poetic account of being, and of Australia, with all its complexities and its passions.

While it is probably fair to say that all poetry is, strictly speaking, a type of non-fiction, biographical poetry has particular features not shared by other poetic genres. The scholarly literature suggests that, as biography, poetry has uncertain value, but nonetheless poets do write in this form. From the story of the king Gilgamesh (c.2100 BCE), right through the millennia and across all major cultures, verse biographies appear. Leni Shilton's new work adds to that vast body of literature the story of Bertha |Strehlow, a woman who exists in history primarily in her husband's shadow, her contributions to his work barely acknowledged.

Walking with Camels is the product of Shilton's doctorate, 'Giving Voice to Silence' (2016), in which she calls the work both a 'verse novel' and a 'biography in poetry'. This double identity is perfectly reasonable: it is, after all, a collection of individual poems that stand as poems in their own right, but together form a narrative arc; and, as the end-notes show, they are deeply embedded in, and emerge from, the archival documents held in the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs.

Shilton effectively straddles the different demands of poetry, history, life writing, and an imaginative embodying of that life and the country in which it was lived – no easy task given that each mode comes with different demands and trajectories. The balance is achieved in part by the substantial endmatter: a timeline of Bertha's life, a contextualising note for each poem, and a bibliography.

The poems are organised chrono-

logically, from Bertha's first meeting with her husband Ted, to the moment of her death, and vary from monologue to imagistic lyric to a kind of reportage. The poem 'Alice Springs', for example, is quite prosaic, and seems to be there largely to locate the Strehlows and move the story along to the next stage of their lives – Hermannsburg and then into the desert, which inspires some of the more lyrical and imagistic poems in the collection. See 'Rain', for instance:

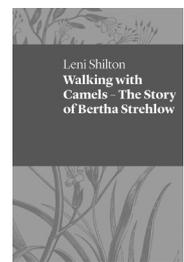
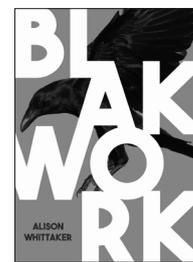
The day darkens, turns to rain.
We walk in fine mist,
the sand deepened to blood red,
until we are wet through.

These lines take on the quality of a haiku: close attention to the natural world and the human experience of momentary transformation, along with the magic of light, texture, and colour in a land that exists independent of human presence.

Bertha, who exists in the historical record principally as Ted Strehlow's wife, is here a vibrant, sympathetic, and entirely believable presence. Ted comes to us primarily through Bertha's account, which is loving but not really

admiring: someone whose moods need to be managed (in 'Camel Memories', for example: 'when Ted grew stern, / serious, / even hateful, / I'd remind him of our desert time / ... and slowly / they would bring him round').

The book is Bertha's: her story, her perspectives, her deep respect for land and its traditional owners; and her growing attachment to her children rather than her husband. The voice is disarmingly simple, but Bertha's curiosity, along with her openness to adventure, compassion, and resilience, 'gives voice to silence'. ■



Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra, and Director of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research in the Faculty of Arts and Design.

'Alone we are born'

Distillations in nine lines or fewer

Joan Fleming

SHORT POEMS OF NEW ZEALAND

edited by Jenny Bornholdt

Victoria University Press, \$38.95 hb, 175 pp, 9781776562022

A new anthology of bite-sized New Zealand poems is freshly out from Victoria University Press. VUP is the Wellington-based publisher closely associated with the University's renowned creative writing school, known affectionately (or pejoratively, depending on your affiliation) as 'The Bill Manhire School'. The anthology is edited by former NZ Poet Laureate Jenny Bornholdt, a softly spoken

giant of New Zealand letters who has been writing lauded poems of deceptive simplicity and depth since she first took Manhire's class in 1984.

Bornholdt's self-imposed rules for the anthology were to select poems of nine lines or fewer. Six lines felt too restrictive; ten, somehow, too roomy to be 'properly short'. What is it, then, that a short poem can accomplish, that longer poems can't, or don't?